

CHAVARA, A CHAMPION OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Socio-Religious Situation of Women in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Kerala¹

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Abstract: This article presents the society of Kerala in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with an eye for the plight of women in various strata of the society and religious persuasions. This comprehensive discussion leads to highlight the contribution of the various foreign missionaries in the nineteenth century towards the empowerment of women through education. The revival and empowerment of women gathers momentum at the foundation of the Congregation of Mother Carmel (CMC).

Keywords: Women, women's status, Hindu women, Brahmin community, Nair Society, *Ezhava* community, slave, caste, Muslim community, Thomas Christians, Latin Christians, women's education, Protestant missionaries, literary works

1. Introduction

Studies in women empowerment have a great significance for our times. Many contemporary theologians, especially Asian and Indian, show great interest in this area of research. The twentieth century witnessed attempts to read and understand the history of women. The vast economic and social changes around the world due to technological and scientific development have generated a keener interest in women's status, role of education in their lives, and in

¹This article is an abridged version of the paper presented in IASACT - 2011 (Institute for Advanced Study in Asian Cultures and Theologies) in Hong Kong University conducted by the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia.

ensuring quality of life.² However, there are many facets of gender discrimination both in the family and in the society. Today there is a greater awareness about the problems women face and much is being done to solve these problems.

The United Nations Report on the Status of Women Worldwide states:

The realities of women's lives throughout the planet indicate that gender equality in all its manifestations remains a long way off. Women are still the group of people who undertake the bulk of the unpaid work which is done in the society, live in greatest poverty, control the fewest resources, and are hardly educated even to the primary school level.³

Almost all cultures are tainted with signs of oppression of women in varying degrees. Women are targets of sexual assault and violence. When it comes to their rights, women are often not aware of their rights to property and education, their legal and political rights, their decision-making power or even their basic human rights.

This study focuses on the status of women in Kerala in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and offers an analysis of the social institutions and religious practices of the society in order to understand the role and position of women in the society and in the family during the period. The study also takes into consideration the contributions made by Kuriakose Elias Chavara in this period towards the empowerment of women in the society by means of the foundation of the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel (CMC). He was a multifaceted personality chosen by God to shed the light of love and divine wisdom in the dark recesses of the nineteenth century Kerala society. He listened to the voice of God speaking to him in various ways, and he was determined to respond to the divine call.

2. Women: Socio-Religious and Educational Scenario

The history of Kerala is part of the general history of Indian culture. Kerala as a state came into existence a decade after the Independence of India, mainly based on India's linguistic reorganisation in 1956. Two

²Navya Maria, *Empowered Womanhood*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2014, 89.

³Sinha, Debotosh. "Empowering Women: A Catalist in Social Development." in *Women In Development: Challenges and Achievements*, eds. Narayana Reddy, V. Vijay Kumar J., and Nalini, 3-20. New Delhi: Serials Publication, 2005, 5.

of the princely states, Cochin and Travancore in the south, and the British administered Malabar in the north were merged together to form Kerala. All the three units, in spite of their separate political identities, had shared broadly the same social practices and language. The system of joint families, Malayalam language, caste and religious practices and rules and rituals about purity and pollution bound them together. Nevertheless, as a result of their separate and distinct history and religious composition of population, there also existed wide variations in their social and economic development.⁴

Several of the European travellers and Christian missionaries who visited Kerala between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries have left written records about the condition of women during the period. According to these records, all women were to obey the laws and customs of the country and they were considered simply as instruments for the happiness of man. Mateer reports:

The men assumed the right of dishonouring any woman, whatever her rank or circumstances; and the laws permitted them to put anyone to death on the spot, which should resist their brutal demands. Without education, moral training or real knowledge of the world, the majority of women spent their time mostly within the four walls of the kitchen or in gossiping with their friends on the most frivolous and profitless topics.⁵

The social evils of untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability played havoc on the lives of women. Until the nineteenth century sufficient attention was not given to women's education in Kerala. Even the people of the high castes did not like to send their girl children out of the house.⁶

The nineteenth century was a period of transition for Kerala society as a result of the commercial and cultural interaction with various European countries and the consequent spread of western education. The socio-religious and educational movements of the time initiated by the newly emerged middle class and western educated intelligentsia served as impetus for the government of Travancore to

⁴Leela Gulati, *Gender Profile: Kerala*, New Delhi: Royal Netherlands Embassy, 1991, 1.

⁵Samuel Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*. London: W.H. Allen and Co., 1870, 209.

⁶L. E. Sahanam, *The Contributions of LMS Missionaries in the Field of Education in South Travancore: A Historical Enquiry*, Bangalore: United Theological College, 1976, 24.

issue, a series of edicts and proclamations effecting the eradication of many social evils and practices that contributed to the plight of women.

3. Status of Women: Social Background and the Social Institutions

In order to make an evaluation of the status of women in Hindu, Muslim, and Christian religious traditions of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries in Kerala society and to consider how far they have influenced the moulding of the status of women in the period, it is necessary that we examine a few prevalent social institutions such as caste system, *janmi* system, *sambandham*, *devadasi* system, *marumakkathayam*, etc. The social institutions and customs prevalent in Kerala during the period under discussion give us a clear picture not only of the society, but in a special way, of the status of women in that society during these centuries.

The Brahminic policy in Kerala divided the Hindu community into a number of distinct sections based on castes. Caste is a socio-religious system in which birth definitively determined the whole course of one's social and domestic relations. This system gave rise to hierarchical gradation and social discrimination pertaining to privileges, marriage, social status and relationships and choice of occupation.

The triple social evils of untouchability, unapprochability, and unseeability were practised by people at all levels of Hindu society.⁷ These evil practices touched every aspect of the life of the Hindus of the time.⁸ According to Ayyappan, the whole framework of Hinduism was conceived for the comfort and exaltation of the Brahmins.⁹ The Brahminical or Aryan tribes subjugated the primitive inhabitants of India; in order to retain them in a condition of subservience and inferiority, Brahmins invented the legends which are related in the Hindu *Puranas* concerning the origin of caste. To cement the distinctions, religious sanction was brought in. It was taught that the Brahmins were born from the mouth of *Purusha*, the creator, the

⁷A. Sreedhara Menon, *Social and Cultural History of Kerala*, New Delhi: Sterling Publications, 1979, 66.

⁸E. L. Sivathambika, *The Untouchables and Their Struggle for Temple Entry in Kerala-Since 1920*, PhD Dissertation, Kottayam: Mahatma Gandhi University, 1991, 12.

⁹A. Ayyappan, *Social Revolution in a Kerala Village*, Bombay: Publisher unavailable, 1965, cited in Ivy, *The History of Ezhavas*, 5.

Kshatriyas from the limbs, the *Vaisyas* from the waist, and the *Sudras* from the feet.¹⁰ In this way, the Brahmins placed their claim to superiority on a religious basis; and the result has fully justified their shrewd and selfish policy.¹¹

In addition to promoting the practice of untouchability in a barbarous manner, the caste system also operated in such a way as to confer on the high caste Hindus certain special immunities and privileges and to deny to the low castes even the most elementary human rights. They interpreted the sacred laws in the most discriminating manner. According to Mateer, "His (a Brahmin's) word is law; his smile confers happiness and salvation; his power in heaven is unlimited, the very dust of his feet is purifying in its nature and efficacy..."¹²

The *Janmi* system was another significant socio-economic institution of Kerala society, which, on the one hand, gave the landlords economic protection, social and religious sense, and, on the other, created a large number of unprotected people, who, literally, were slaves in bonded labour in the land of the *janmi*. Neither those who gave themselves in bondage nor their children had any escape from the plight they were in.

Kerala was one of the most caste-conscious provinces of India. The caste order in Kerala is quite different from that of North India. This fact has been observed by several foreign writers.¹³ According to them, there existed in Kerala in the most accentuated form, the "touch and distance pollution between higher and lower castes which was unheard of anywhere else in India. It is true that in these two respects Kerala was a worse sinner than the rest of India."¹⁴

¹⁰*The Hymns of Rgveda*, X:90.12, trans. Ralph T. H. Griffith, ed. J. L. Shastri, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas Publishers, 1973.

¹¹Samuel Mateer, *The Land of Charity: A Descriptive Account of Travancore and Its People with Special Reference to Missionary Labour*, London: Johnsnow and Co., 1871, 27.

¹²Mateer, *The Land of Charity*, 31-32.

¹³Ibn Batuta, Abdul Razak, Nicolo Conti, Barbosa, Buchanan and Francis Day were early foreign travelers, writers, and observers of Kerala.

¹⁴Kumari S. Padma, *Study on the Status and Role of Women in the Public Life of Kerala from 1850-1956*, PhD Dissertation, Thiruvananthapuram: University of Kerala, 2002, 34.

4. The Status of Hindu Women in the Kerala Society

We read in *The Laws of Manu*¹⁵ that a woman must be kept in dependence by the male member of the family all through her life. "Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence."¹⁶ The position of women in the Hindu society was at its very low and they were completely subservient to men.

This is not the picture presented to us in the beginning of the first millennium AD, which is called *Sangam* age, corresponding with the first five centuries of Christian era. During this period women enjoyed complete freedom of movement as well as the right to education. Owing to the high level of female literacy, the *Sangam* age produced many a gifted poetesses. The *Sangam* literature contains references to many educated and learned women who contributed much to the cultural life of their times.¹⁷ However, in the subsequent period, the society was transformed and the status of women took a downturn. In course of time, Brahmin domination, *sambandha system*, child marriage, ban of widow marriage and denial of education to women relegated them to a lower status.

4.1. Women in the Brahmin Community

A Brahmin in Kerala was called *Nambudiri* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The women of *Nambudiris* were called *antarjanam*.¹⁸ The very name highlights their position of anonymity and lack of any legal and social status. Although among all classes of women, the Brahmin women enjoyed a singularly high and unlimited superiority, they were not free from social taboos. Dowry, polygamy, and oppressive family traditions were the weapons employed by men to keep women under subjugation. The community, therefore,

¹⁵*The Laws of Manu* is a collection of ordinances, the authorship of which is attributed to the mythical sage Manu. He is believed to be the son of Brahman; he was the most ancient and greatest of all lawgivers. There are differences of opinion as to the period of the Laws of Manu. A more accepted period is between 300 and 200 BC. Bhavya, *Indian Women in Religious Life*, 29.

¹⁶*Manu Smriti*, IX: 2-3, *The Laws of Manu*, trans. George Buhler, Oxford: Clarendon Publications, 1886.

¹⁷A. Sreedhara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*. Kottayam: Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society Ltd., 1967, 80-82, 393.

¹⁸The literal meaning of *antarjanam* being "people inside the house" or one who keeps oneself inside the house.

gloomily welcomed the birth of a girl child. This early gloom turned into restrictions as the child grew. Her movements, deeds, words, and even thoughts were so restricted as to make her life worse than that of a slave.¹⁹ At an early age itself, the *Nambudiri* girls were aware of the fact that they would not have the same status as that of the boys and that they had to be contended with an inferior status in the society. The girl children, moreover, were made to feel that they occupied only a lower place at home and in society, and the rites and rituals were patterned after this belief to instil this feeling in them.²⁰

Sexual taboos in the society were observed only in the case of women. They were not free to have a say in their own marriage alliances. The poor *Nambudiri* women were forced to marry aged *Nambudiri* men and live as their *sapatnis*. Even teenage girls who did not know the meaning of marriage were forced to marry aged men. Thus, *Nambudiri Illams* were sometimes filled with young widows. The women in traditional times had no other status than their roles within the family and that confined them to the kitchen and the bedrooms. They had to cook and place the dishes on the table, but were not allowed to eat with their husbands; it was considered indecent and contrary to custom.²¹ The wife should eat from the same plantain leaves used by the husband; the water used for washing the feet of the husband was considered to be *teertham* (holy water) for the wife.²² The total denial of education and their social insularity made the *Nambudiri* women totally subservient to their men. They had no opinions, beliefs and attitudes of their own other than those spelt out by their men.²³ To crown all these, they had absolutely no right to property. In short, they had neither legal nor social status.

¹⁹Suma Rose, *Polity, Society and Women: With Special Reference to Travancore 1700-1900*, Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2004, 66.

²⁰Navya Maria, *Empowered Womanhood*, 106.

²¹R. N. Yesudas, *A History of Women's Education in Kerala*. Trivandrum: South Indian Social Centre, 1988, 18.

²²J. J. Pallath, "Women and Caste Discrimination: The Namboothiri-Dominated Period of Kerala Culture and Society: The Oppression of Women and the Misuse of Religious Authority: Part 1" accessed on 16 August 2002. <http://www.hi=en&source=hp&q=smarthavicharam&btnG=Google+Search&meta=&aq=f&oq=>

²³L. A. Krishna Iyer, *Travancore Tribes and Caste*, vol. 1, Trivandrum: Government Press, 1939, 206.

4.2. Women in the Nair Society

Nair women enjoyed considerable social status and liberty of action in their society. Most of them were taught to read and write, but that would be the limit of their liberty.²⁴ Fortunately, Nair women had always been recognised as having independent rights. The very foundation of the matrilineal system depended on the predominant rights which they possessed in the family.²⁵ However, this view is only partially true since the life of a Nair woman was totally miserable, especially concerning their marital status. The social institutions such as *sambandham*, *devadasi system*, and *marumakkathayam* used women as pawns in the property game and little importance was given to their personal feelings.

4.2.1. Sambandham

The *sambandham* is a system of marriage in which a Nair woman marries a male member of a *Nambudiri* family.²⁶ Only the *Moosad*²⁷ in the Brahmin *illam* was allowed to enter into official marriage with a woman from the Brahmin community. The *Aphan Nambudiris*, the younger Brahmin boys who form the majority, entered into *sambandham*. However, they were not able to experience true marital love nor were they able to return the same to their cohabiting partner. According to Pallath,

They never experienced the loving care of their wives, never once knew the sublime feeling of the commitment to their wives [*sic*]. Having lived for generations without tender feelings, they became strange creatures that lost the capacity to communicate love and affection. According to the practice of *sambandham*, the woman remains in her house, and the *Nambudiri* visits her at night... They beget children not knowing the burden of responsible parenthood.

²⁴Mateer, *Land of Charity*, 38.

²⁵Menon, *Travancore Marumakkathayam*, 73.

²⁶According to Act IV, Madras Marriage Act, 1896, cited in Moore, "Symbol and Meaning in Nayar Marriage Ritual," Melinda Moore, 18 September 2009, <http://en.wikipedia.org/>, a *sambandham* means "an alliance between a man and a woman, by reason of which they, in accordance with the custom of the community to which they belong, or to which either of them belongs, cohabit or intend to cohabit as husband and wife."

²⁷*Moosad* is the eldest son of the Brahmin family and the other sons of the family are called *Aphans*.

The children of this contract grow up under the supervision of an uncle without experiencing the care and affection of the father.²⁸ Under this system, no sort of formality was necessary to dissolve a *sambandham*.

4.2.2. Devadasi System

The development of the *devadasi* system in Kerala resulted from the caste and *Janmi* practices. The *devadasis* were dancing girls attached to temples. It was their duty to raise funds for the temples by giving performances in music, dance, and other fine arts. In the beginning, the life of the *devadasis* was one of spotless purity; it was rather a profession than a class. They were considered to be ladies of virtues. The *devadasis* were considered superior to married women because they carried the god's mark on them.²⁹ However, "With effect from the thirteenth century there was a basic change in the character of the *devadasi* system. The post of *devadasi* became hereditary and with it the respectability attached to it was lost.

The main function of the *devadasis* thereafter was to entertain Kings (*naduvazhis*) and *Janmis* and not to worship the gods.³⁰ Eventually, influential people began to visit temples not so much to pay their respect to the deities but to carry on their love and fascination with the dancing girls there.³¹ The *devadasi* system in Kerala declined also for the lack of royal patronage. Later, the growth of education and western influence exposed the immorality inherent in the system and it was condemned as a social evil.³² At any rate, it had become a system which undoubtedly degraded the position of women in the society.

²⁸J. J. Pallath, "Women and Caste Discrimination: The Namboothiri-Dominated Period of Kerala Culture and Society: The Oppression of Women and the Misuse of Religious Authority: Part 2," 26 May 2003. <http://www.hi=en&source=hp&q>

²⁹E. Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, vol. VII, New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1909, 12.

³⁰Menon, *Social and Cultural History of Kerala*, 82.

³¹Atlekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, cited in Rose, *Polity Society and Women*, 74.

³²Lopez, *A Social History of Modern Kerala*, 164.

4.2.3. Marumakkathayam

The high position, status, and freedom of Nair women were primarily due to the matrilineal system of inheritance (*marumakkathayam*) and the family organization connected with it. *Marumakkathayam*³³ denotes the system of inheritance in which descent is traced along the female line.³⁴ Among the Nairs, neither the husband nor the wife changes residence. They are duo-local. Though the descent is traced along the mother, the responsibility of the management of the ancestral property of the *taravad* was vested in the hands of the eldest male member of the woman's family. This was called matrilineal system.³⁵

The family system in existence was patriarchal in which the *karanavar* (eldest male member) of the *taravad* became the guardian of the joint family. Nevertheless, the inheritance of the property was enjoyed by the members of the family in the female line. As the property of a *taravad* was indivisible and the individual members were not entitled to enforce partition, the *karanavar* of the *taravad* was entrusted with the management of its property and allied affairs.³⁶ Eventually, the *marumakkathayam* system proved to be seriously defective and it evoked strong resentment among the members of the matrilineal families themselves.

4.3. Women in the Ezhava Community

The *avarnas* or non-caste Hindus were next to the Nairs in the social order in Kerala. The *Ezhavas* were at the top among the *avarnas*. They suffered many disabilities along with the other non-caste Hindus. An *Ezhava* had to keep himself at least thirty six feet away from a *Nambudiri* and twelve feet away from a Nair.

³³The first is the system of inheritance, and of family organisation, known as *marumakkathayam* or literally, "descent through sister's children" bound up with which is the institution known as *sambandham*, the loose form of marriage obtainable among the caste following *marumakkathayam* which entails no responsibility or legal obligation whatsoever on the part of the "husband" towards his "wife" and children. Innes, *Malabar Gazeetteer*, 96.

³⁴Pothen Joseph Modayil, *The Principles of Marumakkathayam Law with a Commentary on the Nair Regulation*, Kottayam: Church Missionary Society's Press, 1919, 290.

³⁵D. Renjini, *Nayar Women Today*, New Delhi: Classical Publishing Company, 2000, 12.

³⁶Renjini, *Nayar Women Today*, 12.

Women of these communities also suffered a lot under the clutches of the high caste. The women folk of the community, they were required, young and old, to appear before caste Hindus, always 'topless'. In 1859, when an attempt was made to give up that practice and some young women covered up their bosoms, there was a furore created by intolerant Nair men, near Trivandrum.³⁷

To mark their degradation, they had to go about topless, i.e., dressed only in a piece of coarse cloth called *mundu* stretching from waist to knees.³⁸ About the use of ornament also there were restrictions. Heavy taxes were imposed on women, such as breast tax and hair tax, by the high caste.³⁹

4.4. Women among the Slave Caste

The *Pulayas*, the *Cherumas* and the *Parayyas* were the lowest class and were considered as slaves. Their dwelling places were miserable huts with mud walls and thatched roofs of grass or coconut leaves. The condition of their women was pathetic. The poor slave women were compelled to labour for their subsistence or starved if they remained idle. They were to flee on the approach of a high caste man or woman. Mateer writes:

It is most painful to see a poor and inoffensive woman, with a load on her back, or burdened with an infant, compelled to scramble up the steep sides of the road and retire into jungle to allow a high caste man or woman to pass: or seeking for favourable chance to cross the highway or go along it. She waits till one party has gone on - then makes a dash - but perhaps it balked by meeting another party in the opposite direction.⁴⁰

An untouchable woman was obliged to hold her hands before the mouth when she was to speak to the members of higher classes and remain at a distance. They went almost naked with only a few inches of cloth around the loins and covering the bosom was forbidden to them. They also had to pay the taxes like the *Ezhava* women, while the privileged classes led a luxurious life at their expense. They were

³⁷G. Rajendran, *Ezhava Community and Kerala Politics*, Trivandrum: The Kerala Academy of Political Science, 1974, 24.

³⁸Mateer, *The Land of Charity*, 41.

³⁹Joy Jnanadasan, *A Forgotten History*, Madras, 1994, 26; see also Jose, *Channar Lahala*, 14-15, where he offers a detailed description of the trials and tribulations of *Ezhavas* in the name of tax.

⁴⁰Mateer, *The Land of Charity*, 290.

deprived of education, lived in wretchedness, despised, disowned, and shunned by all as symbols of disgrace and degradation.

4.5. Women in the Muslim Community

The major part of the Muslim community in Kerala was made up of local converts from various Hindu castes like Nairs, *Mukkuvas*, and *Tiyas*, and for this reason, Islam absorbed several Hindu practices like paying of dowry to the bridegroom, purificatory ablutions after birth, and dress habits. In spite of the conversion they did not give up some of their customs and traditions. Adherence to old Hindu customs and practices could be seen in many of the Muslim communities in Kerala.⁴¹ There is a widely prevalent notion that Muslim women in Kerala enjoyed the lowest status in every sphere of social life compared to their counterparts belonging to other religious communities of the time. It is also assumed that Muslim women were not allowed by their men to take part in many events of social life; they were pushed into stereotype roles of looking after household chores which undermined their capabilities and capacities.⁴²

In the Muslim community, early marriage, at the age of eight or nine became a common practice in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The arrangement of marriage was entirely the concern of the parents on both sides, who agreed to the condition of the contract and fixed the date of marriage. At that time girls were not allowed to express their opinion regarding their marriage.⁴³

According to Padmanabha Menon, "The Muslim women in Kerala are still educationally backward and are hardly found in any of the literary fields. Their general education is very inadequate."⁴⁴ Of late, however, schools have been opened in Kerala for *Mappilas*, and they are being slowly weaned from their radical habits into more favourable paths of life.

⁴¹K. K. N. Kurup, and E. Ismail, *Emergence of Islam in Kerala in 20th Century*, New Delhi: Standard Publishers, 2008, 52.

⁴²Saukath Azim, *Muslim Women: Emerging Identity*, New Delhi: Rawath Publications, 1997, 12.

⁴³M. Indumenon, *Status of Muslim Women in India: A Case Study of Kerala*. New Delhi: Uppal Publishing House, 1976, 17-18.

⁴⁴Menon, *The History of Kerala*, 294.

4.6. Women in the Christian Communities

In the eighteenth century, there were different groups of Christian communities in Kerala. St Thomas Christians had remained divided into two communities since 1665. The Catholic Christians of St Thomas, the larger community, like Latin Christian communities, maintained communion with Rome. The Syrian Orthodox Christians established a close relationship with the Patriarchate of Antioch.⁴⁵ In addition to these, there were Christian missionaries from Europe. Several Protestant Missionary Churches were very active in this period. Here we consider the two Catholic communities in Kerala, namely, St Thomas Christians and Latin Christians.

4.6.1. St Thomas Christian Community in Kerala

The St Thomas Christian Church of Kerala is not only the oldest Church in India; it is one of the oldest Churches in the whole world.⁴⁶ The ancient Church in India, known as the Church of the 'St Thomas Christians', is as old as Christianity in the Indian soil. They had their own spirituality, liturgy, theology and discipline until the sixteenth century.⁴⁷ But its ecclesial traditions had been subjected to many changes down through the centuries.⁴⁸

The St Thomas Christian women of Kerala had many peculiarities in their customs and manners which distinguished them from the other women folks of Kerala. The costumes they used to wear were worthy of special note which in many ways resembled those of the high caste Hindu women. The devotion of the St Thomas Christian women to their husbands was proverbial. Their social and religious lives were not much distinguishable from other religions and the members of the community were the most conservative in their religious practices. Their sole social appearance might have been the

⁴⁵E. R. Hambye, *History of Christianity in India*, vol. III, Bangalore: The Church History Association of India, 1997, 21.

⁴⁶K. C. Zachariah, *The Syrian Christians of Kerala: Demographic and Socio-Economic Tradition in the Twentieth Century*, New Delhi: Orient Longman Limited, 2006, 3.

⁴⁷Address of Achille Silvestrini for the Opening of the Syro-Malabar Synod 8th 1996, cited in *Christian Orient* 17, 1 (1996), 42.

⁴⁸X. Koodapuzha, "The Ecclesiology of the Thomas Christians in India" in *Ecclesial Identity of the Thomas Christians in India*, ed. Vellilamthadam, 61-92, Kottayam: OIRSI, 1985, 86.

occasional attendance at Church services.⁴⁹ Bernard writes: "The Hindu women were allowed to go to the cultural entertainments conducted in their temple premises at night. But the Christian women were not permitted to go to the public ceremonies conducted in the parishes."⁵⁰

The St Thomas Christian community adhered strictly to patriarchal customs and practices in religious and social field. One of the areas of discrimination against women among the Thomas Christians was the denial of participation in the Church activities. The local Church assembly (*palliyogam*), consisting of the heads of the Christian families and the clergy of parish (*edavaka*), used to discuss all matters of common importance and made decisions. Women were not part of these bodies and had no place in the religious hierarchy.

St Thomas Christians have followed patrilineal system of inheritance. The father is the head of the family and is often called *karanavar*, a title which is also given to the eldest male member in the family.⁵¹ The *makkathayam*⁵² system was in force among them. The sons of a family inherited the father's property but the daughters were provided with a dowry. If a couple had only female children, they would adopt as their heir a boy child related to the father in the male line, and this adoption took place in the presence of the bishop.⁵³ To keep up their family traditions, they would not make their daughters heirs to their properties. Within the family, because of patrilocal residence, patrilineal inheritance and the practice of dowry, sons were preferred to daughters to some extent, and preferential treatment was given to sons in such matters as education, social status, etc.⁵⁴

The women were not to eat with their husbands. At meals, wives would serve their husbands, and would eat only after the husbands

⁴⁹P. J. Podipara, *The Thomas Christians*. Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1970, 96-97.

⁵⁰Thomas Bernard, *Mar Thoma Christyanikal*, vol. I, Pala: Publisher unavailable, 1916, 254.

⁵¹Jackson John, "Lifestyle of Kerala Syrian Christians," 15 April 2008. http://www.mjackson_12@yahoo.co.in.

⁵²In this system, the son inherits the right of property from the father.

⁵³Scaria Zachariah, ed., *Randu Prachina Gathyakritikal: Udayam Peroor Soonahadosinte Kanonakal A.D. 1599*, Changanassery: The Sandessanilayam Press, 1976, 106-107.

⁵⁴K. C. Alexander, *Social Mobility in Kerala*, Poona: Deccan College, 1968, 77.

had finished.⁵⁵ They took great interest in the comfort and welfare of their husbands, fathers-in-law and mothers-in-law. The community was characterized by a very high death rate, very high birth rate, marriage at a very early age, and a large family of 10 to 12 children per married woman.⁵⁶

4.6.2. The Latin Christian Community of Kerala

The Roman Catholics of the Latin rite were divided into three communities⁵⁷ among whom there was no intermarriage. The Latin Christian women enjoyed much freedom in the family, compared to other women. Bartalomeo says that they "distinguish themselves by simplicity of manners, diligence and contentment."⁵⁸ Among the Catholics of the Latin rite, the social life and the marriage customs did not differ very much from those of the Syrian rite. The marriageable age of boys and girls, their betrothal, the publication of the banns in the two parish churches, the marriage rite in the church, the usual wedding feasts in the houses of the bride and the bridegroom, the bridegroom returning with his bride to his house, and the attendance of the married couple in the parish church of the former were all the same.⁵⁹ According to Krishna Ayyar, the law of inheritance among them is somewhat vague and unsettled.⁶⁰ However, there were no uniform practices among the community; it varied from place to place.

5. Efforts for the Uplift of Women

The miserable condition of the women of Kerala urged the Protestant Christian missionaries, who arrived there in the beginning of the nineteenth century, to do something enduring for their uplift. They found that the women were not practically receiving any education and they were acting only as servants to men. The reaction of a missionary to this state of affairs could be seen in the following words:

⁵⁵Joseph, M. O. *Kerala Christhyanikal*. Cochin: Janatha Book Stall (1972), 165. See also Podipara, *The Thomas Christians*, 80-81.

⁵⁶K. C. Zachariah, *The Syrian Christians of Kerala*, 4.

⁵⁷The Christians who followed the Latin Rite in Malabar were distributed into three social groups. They are known as (*Ezhunnottikkar*) Seven Hundreds, Five Hundreds (*Anjoottikkar*) and Three Hundreds (*Munnoottikkar*). Ayyar, Anantha Krishna. *Anthropology of the Syrian Christians*. Ernakulam: Cochin Government Press (1926), 253-254.

⁵⁸Yesudas, *A History of Women's Education*, 27.

⁵⁹Ayyar, *Anthropology of the Syrian Christians*, 261.

⁶⁰Ayyar, *Anthropology of the Syrian Christians*, 264.

“In childhood and youth they have no education, no cultivation of any kind whatever; there is not a single girls’ school in all India, and the mother being herself entirely unlettered and being the devoted victim of a dark cruel superstition, is utterly incapable of improving her child.”⁶¹ The missionaries wanted to put an end to this state of affairs and improve the status of women by imparting education to them.

5.1. Empowerment through Education

The history of the education of women in Kerala reveals the remarkable transformation in the quality and status of women which was materialized through the education imparted to them. The education of women which soon became popular and widespread in the state motivated the people, especially women, to see the realities in the society.⁶² It equipped them to transcend the barriers of subjugation and traditions with a new spirit of emancipation and progress. The Christian missionaries were the first to establish girls’ schools in Kerala.

5.2. Christian Endeavours and Education of Women

Schools providing modern education to girls were first started in Kerala by the wives of the Protestant missionaries in the beginning of the nineteenth century. The main aim of the missionaries in founding girls’ schools was to raise the women in their social status and to disarm them of the prejudices found to be blocking the progress of Christianity.⁶³

5.2.1. Protestant Missionaries

At the dawn of the nineteenth century, several missionary societies were organized and firmly established with the objective of spreading the message of Christ. The London Missionary Society, the Church Missionary Society, the Zenana Missionary Society and the Basel

⁶¹Evangelical Magazine, December 1820, 531. This letter is quoted by Yesudas, *A History of Women’s Education*, 27. See also Sahanam, *The Contribution of LMS Missionaries*, 24.

⁶²Suma, “Female Education in the Princely State of Travancore” in *Indian Constitution, Education and Minorities in Kerala*, eds. K. S. Mathew and T. K. Sebastian, 129-144, Tellichery: Institute for Research in Social Science and Humanities, 2009, 129.

⁶³*Report on the Nagercoil Station 1829*, cited in Yesudas, *A History of Women’s Education*, 28.

Mission were some of them. The first quarter of the nineteenth century was extremely favourable for the establishment of the work of the Protestant missionaries in Kerala.

The missionaries of the LMS started a Boarding School for girls at Nagercoil in 1819, and that was the first girls' school in the southern part of Kerala. The Primary objective of this school was to impart basic education along with religious instruction. In 1821, lace-making was introduced on a small scale to help defray the expenses of the school. The girls in the school were also taught knitting and sewing by the missionary ladies. The profits from this branch were used for the boarding, clothing and education of the children.⁶⁴ The missionaries launched a series of programs for popularizing girls' education as there was resistance from the indigenous society. In central Kerala, the work of girls' education was undertaken by the missionaries of the Church Missionary Society (CMS). They established different kinds of institutions for the development of education. Syrian College, Syrian Girls' School, Parochial School, and Training School were some of them.⁶⁵

Zenana Missionary Society started schools mainly for the education of the caste Hindu girls receiving the patronage of the royal family of Travancore. Through this school, they diffused English education among the high caste women and their influence extended to the ladies of the royal house.⁶⁶ In 1864, even though girls' education in Travancore was about half a century old, it was very difficult to get girls into this school.

The Basel Mission and other Christian Missions were responsible for the spread of women's education in Malabar including Cochin. The largest number of girl students studied in the Basel Mission School at Calicut. Co-education was popular in Malabar also, and a good number of girls attended the schools with boys. The *Nambudris*, Nairs, and *Tiyans* were the most enlightened caste in the field of women's education.⁶⁷ The state relied heavily on the missionaries for the

⁶⁴LMS Report, *The Report of the Directors to the Members of the Missionary Society*, London, 1823, 70.

⁶⁵Rose, "Female Education in the Princely State of Travancore," 138.

⁶⁶K. V. Eapen, *Church Missionary Society and Education in Kerala*, Kottayam: Kollett Publication, 1985, 155.

⁶⁷Innes, *Malabar Gazetteers*, 296-297.

education of girls of all castes. The missionaries found it difficult to run the project of education with their own limited resources.

5.2.2. Catholic Endeavours

When the Protestant missionaries introduced modern education, especially English, the Catholic Church had great concerns about the possible spread of Protestantism through English education. The Italian Carmelites working among the Catholics of Kerala had serious concerns about English and modern education in general on account of the Protestant ideals.⁶⁸ The Latin as well as Syrian Catholic communities in Kerala were under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Portuguese *Padroado* until 1886. They forbade the Catholics from attending schools run by the Protestant missionaries.⁶⁹

5.2.2.1. Catholic Missionary Efforts

St Joseph's Girls' School was established in Calicut in 1862 by the newly erected Mangalore diocese. The Congregation of the Apostolic Carmel took charge of this school and admitted students without any distinction of caste and creed.⁷⁰ St Theresa's Anglo-Indian School was founded by Fr Louis Mary Martelly in Cranganore in 1862 and was entrusted to the sisters of the Apostolic Carmel in the 1870's.⁷¹ Another school for girls was established in Tellicherry with the name Sacred Heart School in 1886.⁷² In 1880, a high school was started by the Holy Angels Convent at Trivandrum. This school was established by the Catholic missionaries and was recognized for the purpose of the matriculation examination in 1885. In 1888 the school

⁶⁸Tharakan, "Socio-Economic Factors in Educational Development," cited in Mathew and Sebastian, *Indian Constitution, Education and Minorities in Kerala*, 9.

⁶⁹K. S. Mathew, "Introduction," in *Indian Constitution, Education and Minorities in Kerala*, eds. K. S. Mathew and T. K. Sebastian, 1-29. Tellicherry: Institute for Research in Social Science and Humanities, 2009, 9.

⁷⁰Mathew, "Introduction," *Indian Constitution, Education and Minorities in Kerala*, 10.

⁷¹Mathew, "Introduction," *Indian Constitution, Education and Minorities in Kerala*, 10.

⁷²Mathew, "Introduction," *Indian Constitution, Education and Minorities in Kerala*, 10.

presented four candidates for the matriculation examination, the first girls' high school to do so in Kerala.⁷³

5.2.2.2. Endeavours of Syrian Catholic Church

The pioneering efforts of Catholics in Kerala have made significant contributions in education as well as emancipation of the downtrodden from the nineteenth century onwards. Among the Catholics, Fr Kuriakose Elias Chavara (1805-1871)⁷⁴ was a man who believed that education would benefit people of all strata of society and took bold steps to work for the realization of his aspirations. The social reforms he undertook have produced inconceivable social changes and those effects are very much visible even today. Considering the social situations of the nineteenth century, he took steps for raising the living standards of women, *dalits*, and the downtrodden by educating them and eradicating the caste system.⁷⁵ He felt the need of educating women for the spiritual formation of families and society and of engaging them in some kind of income generating profession to support the family and, thereby, to win recognition for them in the family. By means of education, he enabled women to play a leading role in the society.

5.2.2.3. Literary Endeavours of Blessed Chavara

Chavara realized very early that education was a powerful means of liberation and decided to use it as a weapon to fight social evils. In 1846, he established a Sanskrit school at Mannanam where he admitted children of all castes and creeds.⁷⁶ It was a daring step at a time when the schools in Kerala admitted only children of the upper castes. Besides, Sanskrit, the sacred language of India, was considered to be accessible only to Brahmins. But Chavara allowed and encouraged children of lower castes to learn Sanskrit at his school at

⁷³Report of the University Committee Travancore 1923-24, Trivandrum: Government Press, 1925, cited in Yesudas, *A History of Women's Education*, 33-34.

⁷⁴Chavara was the Vicar General of Syrian Church, founder of two religious congregations (CMI and CMC), Prior General of men TOCD congregation, mystic, poet, writer, historian, educationist and a great social reformer of the society at that time.

⁷⁵Lucas Vithuvattical, "Blessed Chavara: The Un-Questioned Leader," *Herald of the East* 6, 1-3 (October 2003), 8-17.

⁷⁶C. D. Valerian, *Malankara Sabhamathavinte Oru Veera Santhanam*, Mannanam: St. Joseph's Press, 1938, 137.

Mannanam and in this respect to be considered as the first reformer in Kerala to break this unjust taboo.⁷⁷

Chavara was appointed Vicar General of the Syrian Catholic Church in Kerala in 1861. With the permission of Msgr Bernardin Beccinelli, the Vicar Apostolic of Verapoly, an official letter was sent in 1864 to all the parishes instructing the priest to start *pallikoodams* (schools) attached to the parish churches. Those priests who did not comply with this order were threatened with *amsamudakku*.⁷⁸ Chavara was very careful to implement this order in all the Syrian churches which were great in number compared to the Latin churches of the time. The plight of the downtrodden who were not allowed to educate their children had saddened his heart. He opened two schools exclusively for the outcastes at Mannanam and Arpookara.⁷⁹ Later on similar educational institutions were opened at Edathua, Pulincunnu, and Kainakary.

5.2.2.4. Revival among the Catholic Women

Chavara turned his attention also towards the deplorable condition of women in the society. He wanted to enhance the dignity of women and make them self-reliant. Here too, the most important means he relied upon was education. With this aim, he established a religious congregation for women called TOCD⁸⁰ with the help of Fr Leopold Beccaro OCD, in 1866, at Koonammavu.⁸¹ It is the first religious

⁷⁷Valerian, *Malankara Sabhamathavinte Oru Veera Santhanam*, 137.

⁷⁸*Chronicle of Mannanam Monastery*, vol. III, 90. See also Panthaplackal and Jossy, eds., *Chavarayachante Kathukal*, IX/5:1-2; 24; Valerian, *Malankara Sabhamathavinte Oru Veera Santhanam*, 137; Joseph Kanjiramatthil, *The Pastoral Vision of Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1984, 75. *Amsamudakku* means forbidden from ministering of the Sacraments.

⁷⁹Lucas Vithuvattical, "The Life Vision of Blessed Chavara" in *Light from the East*, ed. James Aerthayil, 252-260. Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1993, 254.

⁸⁰At the time of the foundation, the congregation was known as Third Order of Discalced Carmelites, which included both Syrian and Latin members. After the establishment of a separate Vicariate for Syrians in 1887 both Latins and Syrians formed separate communities and adopted new names. Syrian religious are called Congregation of the Mother of Carmel (CMC) and Latins took the name Congregation of Teresian Carmelites (CTC).

⁸¹*The Chronicles of the Koonammavu Convent*, 27-30. See also Pope John Paul II, *A Heroic Son of the Church in India*, Extracts from the Homily during Beatification of Chavara, 1986, 8-2, cited in *The Lord of Heaven and Earth*, 80.

congregation for women in Kerala. After its division into Latin and Syrian wings, now the congregation is known as Congregation of Teresian Carmelites and as Congregation of the Mother of Carmel. He founded this congregation for women at a time when education and empowerment of the womenfolk were not even dreamt of. Through the empowering of women he aimed at the renovation of families and the larger society. By founding TOCD congregation for women, he opened a new pathway for the emancipation of women. It was the first step towards the self-realisation of women in Kerala. He is best remembered for uplifting women and the suppressed and the oppressed in the society. As the founder of TOCD congregation for women, his vision was to bring the downtrodden women to the forefront and to reach out to the larger society through these empowered women.

5.2.2.5. CMC and the Revival of Women

Chavara's aspiration regarding the dedicated women of the religious community was to mould them as spiritual leaders of all women in the Church and not merely to lead a devout life in a cloister. To equip themselves for the task ahead, they had to master different languages in order to get acquainted with various spiritual traditions of the Church. With this in mind Chavara made arrangements to teach the members of the community Latin, even while they were staying in the first convent (*panambumadam*).⁸² The great vision of Chavara was that women should become the agents of their own progress. A boarding school (*educumthat*) was attached to the first convent at Koonammavu, for the education and formation of girls. On 2 January 1868 the first boarding house for girls was opened at Koonammavu.⁸³ The house aimed at the spiritual as well as intellectual development of the girls to be holy and educated members of the society. Many girls from different parts of Kerala were admitted there. They were taught languages, handcraft, cooking, music, mathematics, catechism, etc.⁸⁴ He also urged the sisters to learn handicrafts and brought efficient

⁸²*Koonammavu Madom Nalagamam*, vol. I, AVPH, Ernakulam: 1866-1870, 31.

⁸³*Koonammavu Madom Nalagamam*, vol. I, AVPH, Ernakulam: 1866-1870, 80-81.

⁸⁴P. V. Annie, "Women Religious Congregations and the Empowerment of Women" in *Indian Constitution, Education and Minorities in Kerala*, eds. K. S. Mathew and T. K. Sebastian, 245-269. Tellichery: Institute for Research in Social Science and Humanities, 2009.

teachers from far off places to give them training. This training programme was expanded further on 16 October 1872.

During this period, members of the congregation that Chavara founded began to teach in a school outside the convent at Koonammavu.⁸⁵ Having imbibed the spirit of their founder Father, in the long run, CMC sisters started faith formation programme, social services, nursing, welfare centres, women empowerment programme and such activities as old age homes, orphanages, shelter for helpless women, etc.⁸⁶ House visiting, listening to the problems of women and children and helping them with vocational training became regular practices in their communities.

Recent history of cultural Kerala tells us that the members of CMC congregation who are determined to fulfil the dream of their founder have become a leading agency in ensuring an all-round development of women in Kerala. Thus, one can say that this seer of a priest laid the foundation for all the future movements of women's liberation and women's empowerment in Kerala.

6. Conclusion

Women being the first teachers who prepare the future generation to take the first faltering steps into the wider world have a vital role to play in any society. The empowered women of the society have the potential to create dynamic changes in the members of the society. The remarkable attempts made by Kuriakose Elias Chavara to set up educational institutions contributed a lot to the development of education and the spread of literacy in Kerala. The education of women also received his special attention. Walking ahead of his times it was natural for this visionary priest to pay attention to women's education and their consequent liberation at a time when nobody else had given a thought to it. The social reforms he undertook resulted in unimaginable social changes whose effect is very much visible even today. Chavara is a great model of women empowerment. It was his contribution to society that brought rapid social changes among the women of Kerala.

⁸⁵Koonammavu *Madom Nalagamam*, vol. II, AVPH, Ernakulam: 1870-1909, 58.

⁸⁶Cleopatra, "Blessed Chavara and the Uplift of Women," *Journal of St Thomas Christians* 16, 1 (January-March 2005), 116.